Road Warriors of the Hindu Kush: The Battle for the Lines of Communication in the Soviet-Afghan War

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The 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War pitted a modern, mechanized army against a strong-willed guerrilla force fighting on some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth. The war soon devolved into a fight for control of the limited lines of communication-the road network which connected the cities of Afghanistan to each other and to Pakistan and the Soviet Union (Map 1). The Afghan guerrillas became very adept at ambushing supply convoys and cutting the roads. The Soviets mounted countermeasures to regain use of the roads, for the ultimate survival of the Soviet occupying army depended on its ability to resupply itself.

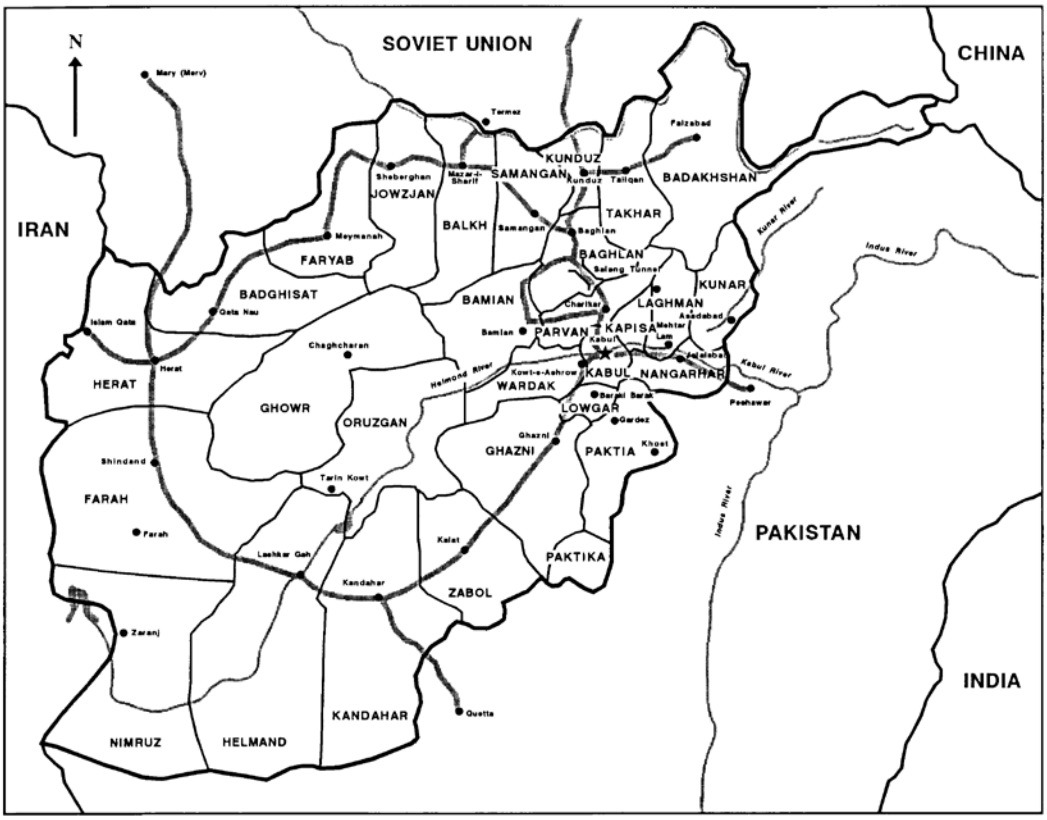

Figure 1 - Map 1: Road Map of Afghanistan and its Provinces

In November 1993, I was visiting Moscow and received a copy of the Frunze Academy's in-house volume of tactical lessons learned in Afghanistan. I have translated the book, provided commentary to the examples and added additional examples. My resulting book, entitled *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Tactics and Tactical Lessons Learned during their War in Afghanistan*, should be published in 1994. This pamphlet extracts four of the forty-nine examples from my book which deal with Soviet road warriors-the soldiers who patrolled the roads and escorted the supply convoys in an attempt to control the lines of communications.

A mobile security patrol in combat near the village of Chandara (Map 2)
by LTC F. V. Zhitoryuk[1]

In April 1985, the 1st Motorized Battalion, which I commanded, was detailed to perform guard and security duties within my regiment's 65-kilometer stretch of the Termez-Kabul highway. I was reinforced with a tank company and an artillery battery. My mission was to secure the unimpeded movement of Soviet and Afghan convoys in my area of responsibility and to prevent the demolition of the pipeline, bridges and sections of highway.

My regimental commander[2] constituted 14 mobile security patrols and 23 security posts for the mission. A reinforced motorized rifle platoon usually functions as a mobile security patrol. A motorized rifle company usually constitutes two or three mobile security patrols and five or six security posts. I designated my share of the patrols and posts and constituted a reserve in case I suddenly had to do battle with the *mujahideen*[3].

Mobile security patrol #31 was my largest mobile security patrol since I had integrated my CP/OP in that grouping. The patrol had 193 men including my battalion command group, a signal platoon, the 1st firing platoon of my mortar battery, a tank company (minus one platoon), the artillery battery (minus a firing platoon), and the battalion's recon platoon.

A guerrilla force of about 500 men operated in my battalion's area of responsibility. They were armed with 82mm mortars, recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns, 122mm rockets and many small arms.

From 16 to 21 April, our division participated in an operation to destroy guerrilla forces in this region. After the operation, the participating units returned to their base camps. Guerrilla activity quickly picked up. Agent reconnaissance

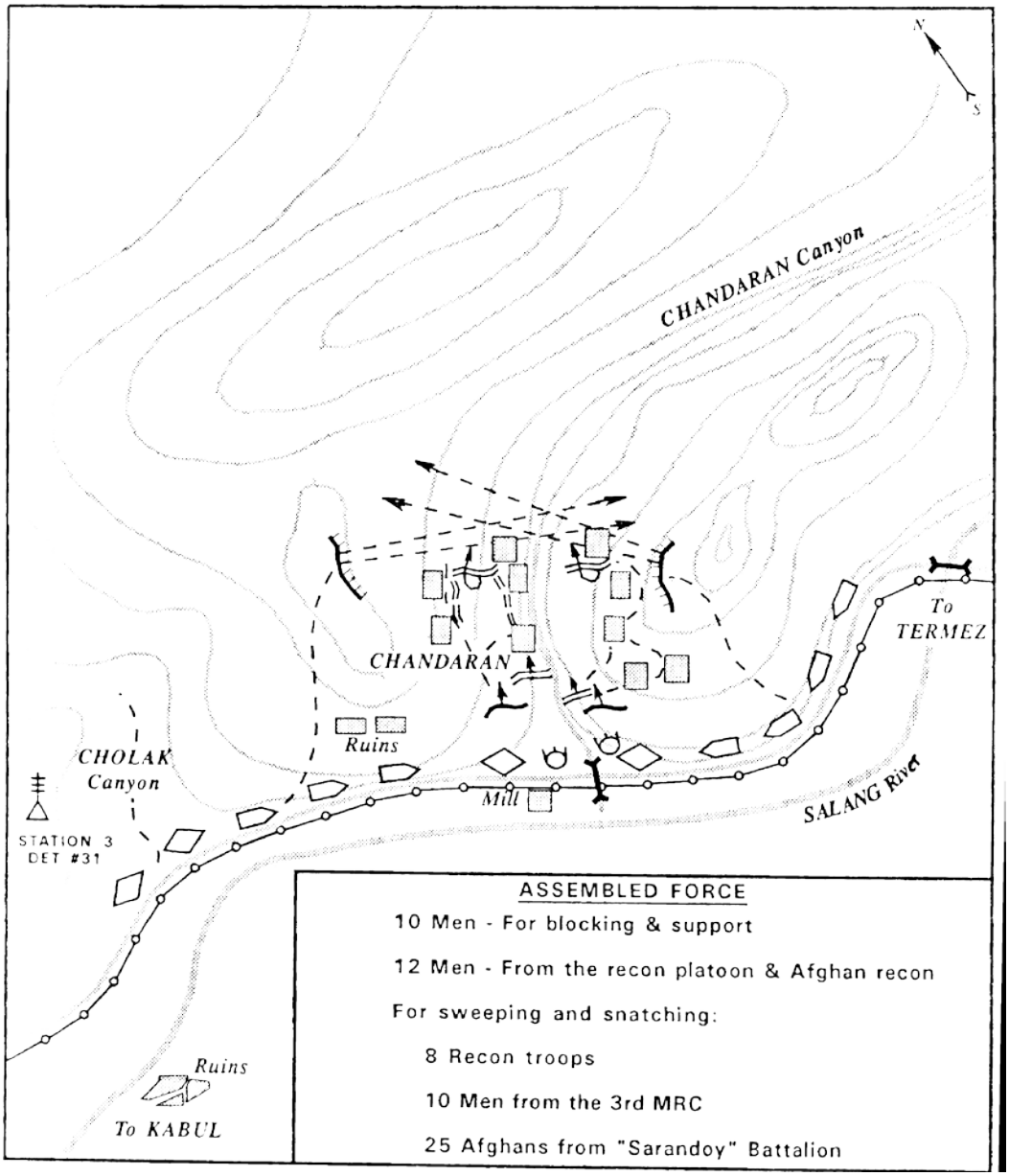

Figure 2 - Map 2: Blocking and sweeping Chandran village

reported that a wounded miner [i.e. one who emplaces land mines] was located in Chandaran village. This miner had been trained by foreign services. Two renegade Russia soldiers who had gone over to the *mujahideen* in 1981 and 1983 were guarding the miner.

I decided to seal off the village on the night of 22-23 April and destroy the enemy. I assembled my recon platoon, the 1st platoon of my 3rd Motorized Rifle Company, and a force from a battalion of Afghan "Sarandoy"[4] for the mission. The group consisted of 73 men, four tanks, eight BTRs, and two "Vasilek" automatic mortars. We were supported by the artillery battery.

At 0100 hours on 23 April, two groups of five men each set out along the pipeline. They were disguised to look like pipeline workers and carried pipeline equipment as they walked and checked the pipeline and worked their way into the target area. Under the cover of night, they crept into place and took up firing positions. At 0400 hours, mobile security patrol #31 quickly moved through the fog cover to Chandaran. They blocked the canyon mouth and entrance to the village, dismounted, formed a line and began to sweep the village.

Precise coordination between the Soviet subunits and the Afghan armed police allowed the battle to precede with minimum casualties. We killed three *mujahideen* and captured sixteen. Among the prisoners were the bodyguards of Said Mansoor, an important guerrilla ringleader in the northern provinces, and the wounded miner. We found out later that the *mujahideen* were resting in the village and because of the sudden and unconventional nature of our subunits actions, they were unable to offer any resistance.

EDITOR'S COMMENTARY: This was a heavy force to go after a minelayer and his renegade guards. Probably the main impetus for the mission was to capture or kill the renegades. It is interesting that their fate is not mentioned. Soviet intelligence relied primarily on radio-intercept and information provided by local Afghan agents who were employed by the KHAD-the Afghan equivalent to the KGB. One of their problems with agent information was that it was often outdated by the time they received it. In this case, they had enough reaction time.

A mobile security patrol destroys a guerrilla force in Khindzhan canyon (Map 3) by LTC F. V. Zhitoryuk[5]

One of the more characteristic actions of a mobile security patrol is illustrated by the destruction of the Naima guerrilla force. This force had fifteen men armed with two RPG-2 antitankgrenade launchers, a DShK heavy machine gun, a sniper rifle and several AKM assault rifles.

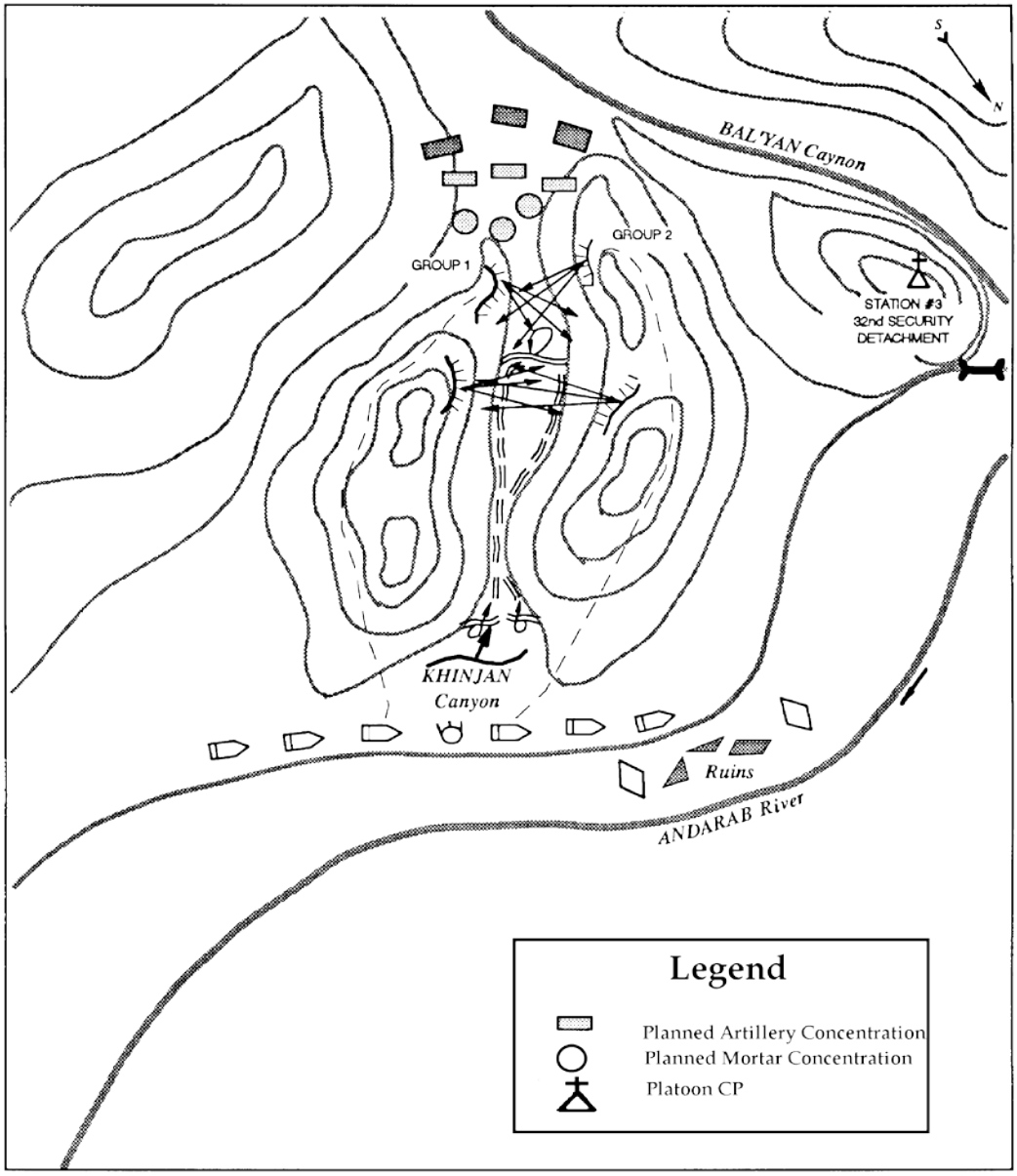

Figure 3 - Map 3: Destruction of the Naima force

On 12 March 1986, my battalion was pulling security duty when I received a report that a BRDM belonging to the local "Sarandoy" battalion was firing in the Khindzhan canyon. This was not far from where my mobile security patrol #32 was working. I ordered my 2nd MRC commander, Captain V. P. Yusov, to take the reserve (eight soldiers on two BTRs) and move on the enemy. Forty minutes later, Captain Yusov reported that the enemy was indeed doing battle in Khindzhan canyon and was firing small arms and grenade launchers.

My reconnaissance platoon was on alert and I had them road march on their vehicles to the combat site. My plan was to have Captain Yusov and the reserve block the *mujahideen* in the

canyon, while my recon platoon would split into two groups and skirt the canyon on two sides to hit the enemy in the rear and destroy him when he tried to withdraw. This plan required a thorough knowledge of the local terrain, the availability of two Mi-8 helicopters (which were in the area) to fly over the battle and report on the composition and location of the enemy, and the availability of the necessary combat power to block and destroy the *mujahideen*.

Twenty to twenty-five minutes after the pursuit began, Major A. G. Kravets, my political deputy, reported that we had overtaken the enemy and joined battle. As a result we killed 13 men and captured two. Additionally, we captured two grenade launchers, one machine gun, eight assault rifles, and two rifles.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: This example shows that decisive, unconventional action, a good knowledge of the terrain, and the correct organization of reconnaissance will lead to success.

EDITOR'S COMMENTARY: These two vignettes show positive, aggressive action on the part of a battalion commander as he finds, fixes and finishes his enemy. These are classic examples of how to do it right. The Soviets seem to have enjoyed some success when cobbling together a mixed force at the spur of the moment and then making it work. This shows a great deal of tactical flexibility on the part of the Soviet battalion commander to even attempt such solutions. The cynic might say that it shows what a Soviet commander could really accomplish when the generals are absent.

LOC Security (Map 4) by LTC M. Tubeev

The first priority of *mujahideen* commanders was to disrupt the movement of convoys travelling on the main roads of Afghanistan. Motorized rifle subunits were usually responsible for route security. Normally, a motorized rifle battalion would

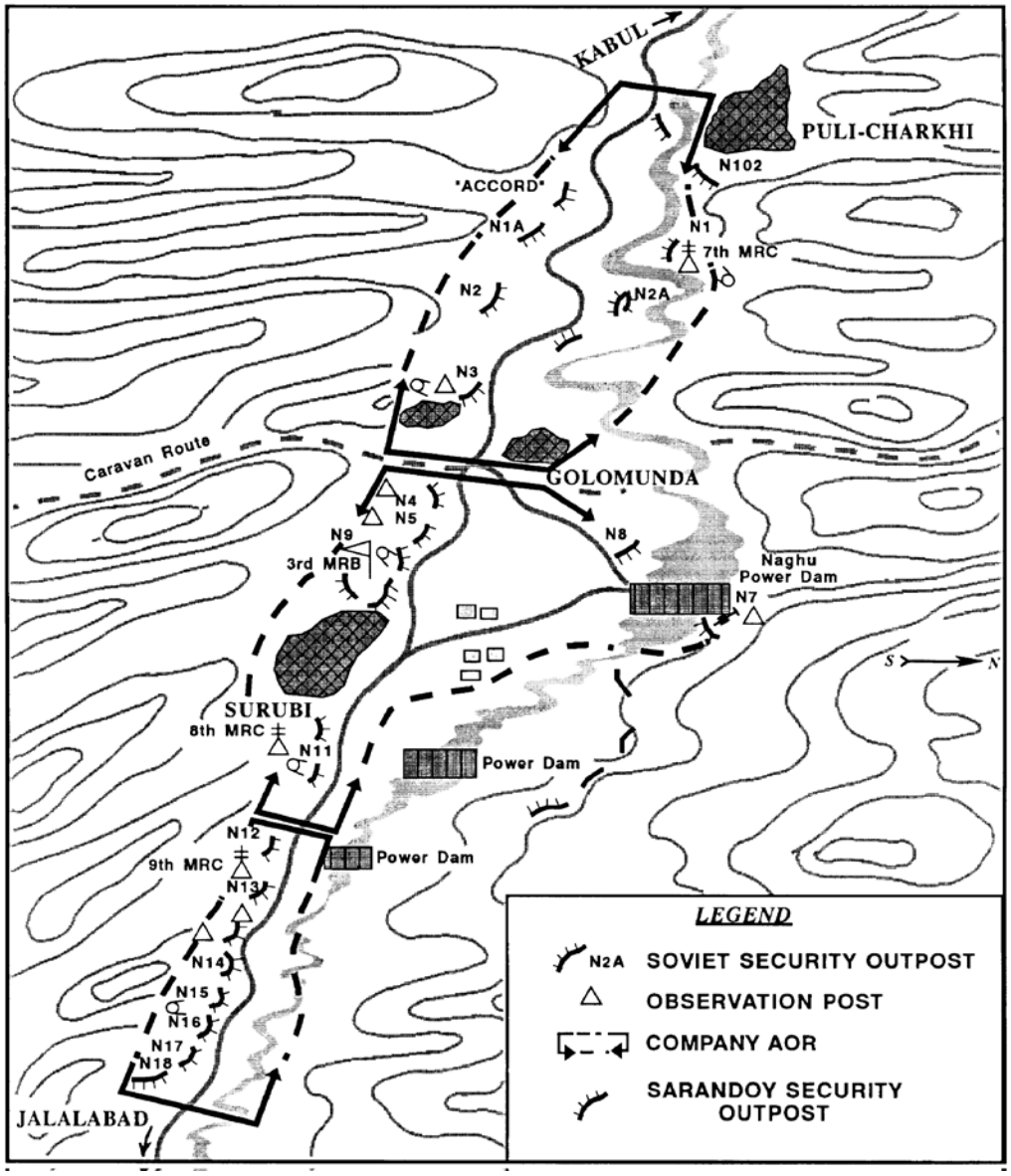

Figure 4 - **Map 4**: LOC security

be responsible for a forty to 150-kilometer stretch of road, whereas a company would cover from two to ten kilometers. In February 1986, my 3rd Motorized Rifle Battalion, reinforced with a tank company and two artillery batteries, was responsible for the security of a 102-kilometer stretch of road along the Puli-Charkhi to Jalabad highway as well as the security of the Naglu power dam site.[6] I could field eleven tanks, 42 BMPs, twelve self-propelled howitzers, 27 82mm mortars, nine twin-barrelled anti-aircraft guns[7], and 23 AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers. I decided to split the area into three sections. My 7th MRC had a 32 kilometer section, my 8th MRC had a 40 kilometer section and my 9th MRC had a 30 kilometer section. I determined the length of each section after considering the terrain, key sites, enemy activity and the line strength of my subunits. I considered several solutions, before I selected the one which seemed to best concentrate combat power in critical sectors.

My LOC security was based on a series of security outposts running the length of the road. An outpost was usually occupied by a motorized rifle platoon, one or two AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers, one or two heavy "Utes" or DSHK machine guns, one or two 82mm mortars and a tank. These could be combined into a security detachment (a motorized rifle company or battalion reinforced with artillery, tanks, and engineers).

The security outposts functioned around the clock. During the day, one man per squad or tank was on watch while a two-man patrol worked the area. At night, every security outpost would send out one or two security points. These four-man points were located 500 to 800 meters from the security outpost and had wire and visual communications with the outpost. The outpost could cover the point with fire.

Each security outpost had a full perimeter defense in order to defeat a *mujahideen* attack from any direction. Each platoon had a primary and alternate sectors of fire with interlocking fields of fire with adjacent units. Crew-served weapons had reserve positions and reserve sectors of fire. Artillery fire planning was carefully done. Artillery subunits were usually collocated in the security outposts with the motorized rifle subunits. The artillery was positioned in order to effectively support all the security outposts. Artillery fires were planned on all likely axes on which the *mujahideen* could move. Targets were registered and numbered. The targets, and their coordinates were maintained by the security outposts, artillery guns crews and by the battalion headquarters. Fires could be adjusted from preplanned targets by the security outpost commander or, if he could not communicate directly with the artillery subunit, through the battalion commander. Normally, it took not more than two-four minutes to bring artillery fire onto a group of *mujahideen*.

We selected the position for the outposts carefully and fortified them throughly. We piled up earth and stones to make complete trenchworks, bunkers, and ammunition, food and water points. We ran two rows of barbed wire fence around each outpost and put antipersonnel mines between the fences. We put trip flares and sensors at remote and concealed approaches to the outposts. The entrance and exit to the security outposts were closed and mined at night. Rules of conduct were posted at the perimeter of the security zone and outside the security outposts. The signs were in the Afghan, Russian and English languages.[8]

Every security outpost had five combat loads of ammunition[9], and ten days worth of food, water and fuel. Night-vision devices, "Blik" binoculars, night scopes, parachute flares and tracer ammunition were available for night-time employment.

Each security outpost maintained the following documents and maps:

- the combat mission of the outpost and the sequence of mission fullfillment:

- the commander's map marked with positions, fire plans and known enemy situation;

- a diagram of the strongpoint;

- orders from the battalion commander;

- combat orders of the security outpost commander;

- an observation schedule;

- a patrol schedule;

- a duty weapon schedule and sectors of fire[10];

-signal tables;

-observer's journals, combat journals and journals of enemy activities.

The battalion produces the security plan which shows the number and composition of each security outpost, the quantity of vehicles, weapons and ammunition at each security outpost, the security belt at each outpost, the defensive plan for key sites, the coordination measures between elements, the defensive fire plan, the signal plan for communication between garrisons, convoys, dispatch posts and the fire support elements. In addition, the battalion had a shift schedule for its subunits and also the battalion commander's order for organization of the security zone. Subunits had their TO&E equipment plus additional radios, telephones and cable communication gear for command and control.

Radio is the primary mean of communications in LOC security. All armored vehicles, TO&E and attached subunits and passing convoys monitor a common channel. The battalion reconnaissance platoon is located close to the battalion command post. It's function is to cut off and destroy any groups of *mujahideen* in the battalion AOR. They usually do this by setting up ambushes on sites where *mujahideen* could approach the highway. Their ambush site is coordinated with the regiment's ambush plan and usually lasts one night. There have been times, however, when the ambush party has stayed on site for three days.

EDITOR'S COMMENTARY:

The Soviet concept of LOC security appears to have been to establish a series of fortified positions, man them and then sit back and wait. This is a very passive, reactive posture. There is no aggressive patrolling or reconnaissance. Here, as was often the case, the Soviets used their reconnaissance force as a primary combat force and not for gathering intelligence. There seems to be no attempt to shift forces, occupy temporary sites and take actions to deceive or "wrong-foot" the enemy. The *mujahideen* could easily collect against this scheme and take appropriate actions to avoid or overcome it.

Escorting a truck convoy from Kabul to Gazni **(Map 5)**
by Major V. I. Rovba[11]

At the end of 1981, guerrilla forces were very active in the province of Gazni. Especially bitter combat was fought along the Gazni-Kabul and Gazni-Kandahar highways. The enemy paid special attention to mining the roads where convoys would pass.

The 9th MRC was stationed six kilometers west of Gazni with our parent regiment.[12] On 5 September, our company commander was ordered to provide an escort on the next day for an 80-vehicle convoy from Gazni to Kabul. On 7 September, we would offload the cargo and would return on 8 September. Two motorized rifle platoons were detailed to provide security and convoy escort. The company commander would command the detail on an R-142 radio set from the regimental communications company.[13] The route is 160 kilometers long.

The only preparation that the troops had for the mission was drawing their ammunition and cleaning their individual and crew-served weapons. The drivers pulled maintenance on their vehicles by themselves.

My company commander decided to keep the convoy together in one single column. He put a BTR in the lead of the convoy and two at the tail. He spaced the remaining BTRs between every 15 or 16 trucks in the convoy. Altogether, he committed seven BTRs to the mission. In the event that the *mujahideen* would attack a motorized rifle squad, each squad's BTR would pull over to the side of the road from which the enemy was firing and return fire with all its weapons. Thus, it would provide covering fire for the trucks driving out of the kill zone. Once the convoy was clear, the BTRs would rejoin the column and reoccupy their positions in the march column. Under no circumstances were we to allow the enemy to stop the column. It would be very difficult to get the convoy going again should it be stopped.

The road march to Kabul passed without incident. However, there was a delay in refilling the fuel trucks that constituted the bulk of the convoy back to Gazni. The return trip was supposed to start at 0600 hours and finally got started at 1030 hours. We had sat on the outskirts of Kabul for four hours waiting for all of the fuel trucks. While we were waiting, individual Afghan trucks loaded with men and cargo continually passed by the entire convoy.

When the loaded fuel tankers finally arrived, they took their place in the convoy. The commander gave the order and the march began. After driving for an hour and a half, we entered

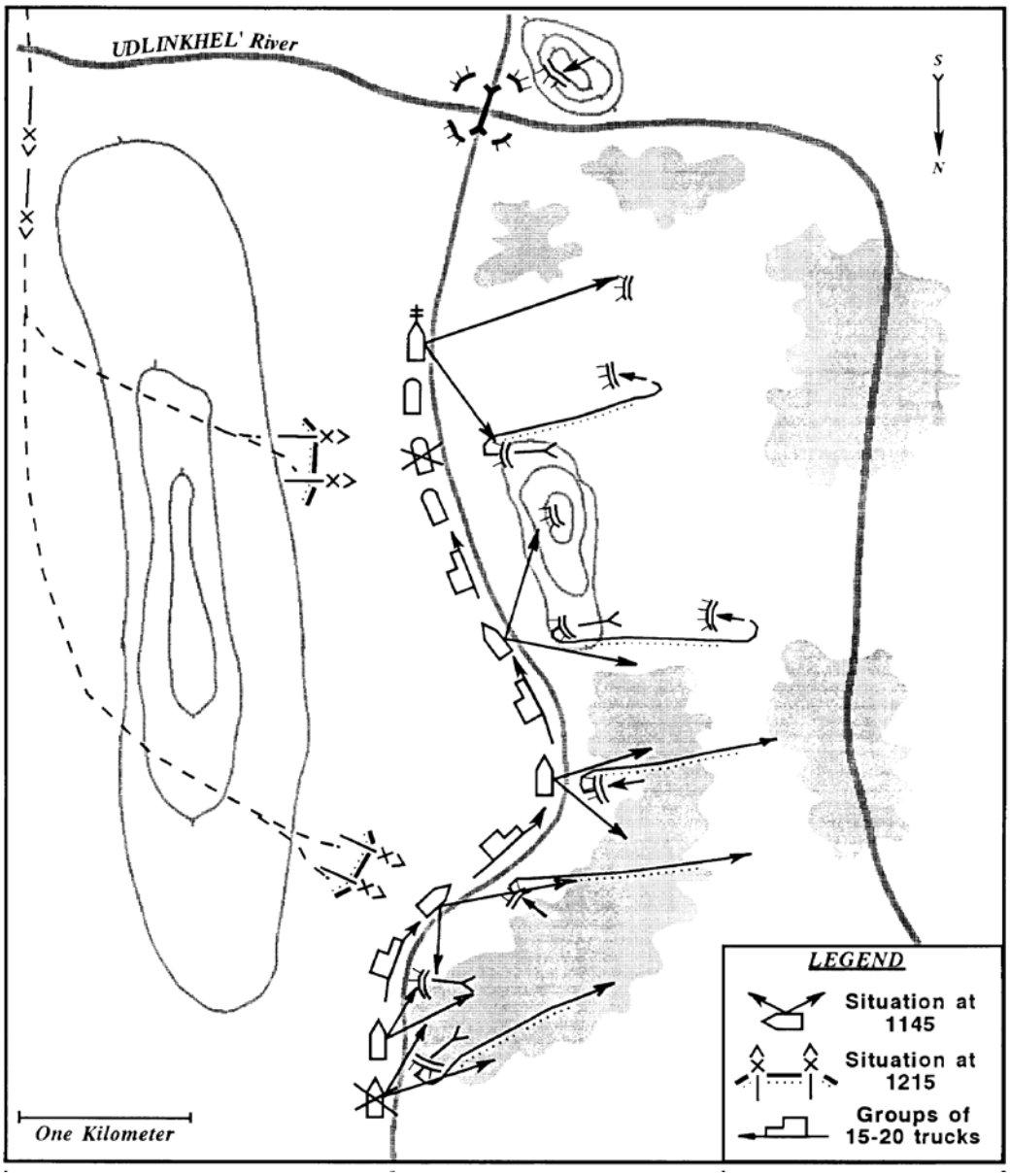

Figure 5 - Map 5: Defeating an enemy attack on a convoy

the minor Kabul-river canyon and traveled through a green zone[14]. Three kilometers ahead of us was an Afghan Army post which guarded a river bridge. The presence of this post had a certain psychological effect and we relaxed our vigilance as we approached the post. The company commander's BTR and the truck with the R-142 radio set traveled at the front of the column. Right behind them was a fuel truck towing a broken-down fuel truck. Once the entire convoy was flanked by the green zone, the enemy opened fire on the lead vehicles with grenade launchers at a range of 25 to 30 meters. The fuel truck towing the other fuel truck was hit. Simultaneously, the enemy opened fire on the tail end of the convoy and knocked out a trail BTR with a RPG.

The escort vehicles reacted as they had been briefed and returned fire. The truck column began to drive out of the kill zone while the enemy was rattled by the return fire. The company commander radioed for air support and thirty minutes after the battle began, helicopter gunships arrived. They hit the enemy and supported the motorized riflemen in their battle. The enemy ceased fire and began to withdraw to fall-back positions. In this combat, we lost one soldier KIA and seven WIA.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: This vignette shows insufficient preparation for the convoy duty and further insufficient preparation in its accomplishment. On the day before the mission, the company commander did not conduct training with his personnel including training on coordination of actions in the event of enemy attack. The prolonged wait along the road side permitted the enemy to closely study the convoy as he drove by the column. The use of helicopter gunships to cover the column from the air did not come soon enough to ward off the enemy attack. Reconnaissance was not used during the course of the march.

Nevertheless, the high psychological preparation of the drivers and the selfless actions of the motorized rifle soldiers allowed the column to rapidly exit the kill zone.

EDITOR'S COMMENTARY: In this vignette, the commander is taken to task for not carefully supervising the preparation of his troops for the march. Part of this criticism is based on lack of trust of subordinates and the lack of a Soviet professional NCO corps. The commander is expected to personally conduct all training. In armies with a professional NCO corps, such training and preparation is done by trained, seasoned sergeants who understand the unit missions and train their forces to meet them. The commander checks his sergeants, but does not have to get involved in training to the extent that his Soviet counterpart had to. This leaves more time for carefully planning the action. The Soviet system overburdened the company grade officers and limited individual training opportunities.

The *mujahideen* learned to take out command vehicles early in the battle. Command vehicles were always distinguished by extra antennae and convoy commanders usually rode in the first vehicle of the main column. Other Soviet writings talk about strapping extra antennae on all vehicles before going into action and varying the commander's position in the column. This did not happen. Consequently, when the commander's vehicle was hit, communications were usually lost and the commander, if he survived, could not control the fight. In this vignette, the essential communications were in a soft-bodied truck, instead of an armored vehicle. The Soviets used radio almost exclusively to control the battle. Although the *mujahideen* had little jamming capability, once they knocked out the Soviet vehicles with the multiple antennae, they usually had disrupted the tactical control net.

***Conclusion*:**

The Soviets lost 11,389 trucks, 1314 armored personnel carriers, 147 tanks, 433 artillery pieces and 1138 command vehicles/radios during their fight with the *mujahideen*. Many of these were lost in the fight for control of the roads. It is hard to say how many of their 13,833 combat dead were from the road war. Clearly, however, protection of lines of communication is an essential task in future wars involving guerrilla forces and the Soviet experience is worth careful study.

Endnotes

1. F. V. Zhitoryuk served in the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan in 1985 as a battalion commander.BACK

2. Most likely the 177th MRR of the 108th MRD.BACK

3. *Mujahideen* (literally "holy warriors") are the Afghan resistance fighters. BACK

4. The Sarandoy were Ministry of Interior armed forces-a heavily armed police force. They were organized into six brigades or regiments (numbering about 6000 men) which were based in Kandahar, Badakhshan, Baghlan, and Parvan provinces plus two in Kabul. The Sarandoy had an additional 6000 men in operational and mountain battalions.BACK

5. This is the same author of the last vignette.BACK

6. 3rd Bn of either the 180th or 181st Motorized Rifle Regiments, 108th Motorized Rifle Division.BACK

7. ZSU-23-2. These 23mm machine guns could fire 2,000 rounds per minute and could be mounted on a truck bed or BTR wheeled personnel carrier.BACK

8. There is no single Afghan language. Pushtu and Dari are the official langages, while Tadjik, Uzbek, Kirghiz, Baluchi, Turkmen and Arabic are also spoken. BACK

9. The combat load [boekomplekt] is a logistic planning term which differs from the US "basic load". Five combat loads is a significant amount--probably enough for six good fights. BACK

10. Duty weapons were manned, crew-served weapons in temporary positions. Only these weapons would engage enemy reconnaissance or probing elements while the rest of the force moved to battle positions. The duty weapons would then move to battle positions. Enemy return fire would be on the temporary position and the enemy knowledge of the locations of defending Soviet crew-served weapons would be faulty.BACK

11. V. I. Rovba served in Afghanistan from 1981 to 1983 as the platoon leader of a motorized rifle platoon. He was awarded the medal "For Bravery".BACK

12. 9th MRC, 3rd Battalion, 191st Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment.BACK

13. The R-142 radio system is actually a R-130 shortwave radio, two R-111 medium-range FM radios and one R-123 short-range FM radio mounted on a GAZ-66 truck. The R-142 can communicate over distance and with helicopter aviation.BACK

14. A green zone is an irrigated area thick with trees, crops, irrigation ditches and tangled vegetation.BACK